Venezuela unveils plans to open oil sector to private investment

CARACAS: Venezuela's parliament on Thursday begins debating plans to throw open the country's lucrative oil sector to private investment, less than three weeks after the US ouster of Nicolas Maduro.

Until now, private companies were only allowed to operate in joint ventures with state-owned oil firm PDVSA, which insisted on holding a majority.

The bill under debate allows for "private companies domiciled in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" to engage in oil exploration and extraction.

The Trump administration is allowing China to purchase Venezuelan oil but not at "unfair, undercut" prices at which Venezuela sold the crude before the US removed its leader Nicolas Maduro, an administration official said.

"Thanks to President (Donald) Trumps decisive and successful law enforcement operation, the people of Venezuela will collect a fair price for their oil from China and other nations rather than a corrupt, cheap price," the official said.

Oil executives and potential investors, as part of Washington's ambitious $100 billion reconstruction plan for Venezuela's energy industry, are demanding autonomy to produce and export oil, and receive the cash sale proceeds after Hugo Chavez's nationalisations and assets expropriations two decades ago. —Agencies

Malaysia's ex-army chief, wife charged with corruption

KUALA LUMPUR: A Malaysian ex-army chief and his wife were charged on Thursday with money laundering in a case stemming from a sweeping graft probe into military procurement that has also snared other top officers.

Muhammad Hafizuddeain Jantan, 57, and his wife Salwani Anuar, 26, pleaded not guilty over allegations linked to hundreds of thousands of dollars they allegedly received.

The Southeast Asian nation's defence establishment has become the focus of a Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) probe, after a series of controversies alleging kick-backs for high-ranking officers.

Hafizuddeain was placed on immediate leave in December, and the MACC opened an investigation that included raids on several companies and the freezing of bank accounts linked to the pair. He retired January 1, 2026. The probe has also led to the arrest of several other top military officers.

Prosecutors say Hafizuddeain received proceeds from illicit activities totalling 2.122 million ringgit ($524,892) between February 2024 and November last year, which were paid into his bank accounts.

His wife Salwani, is accused of receiving 77,000 ringgit paid into an account belonging to a company she controlled. Both were released on bail, but ordered to surrender their passports and report to the MACC once a month while the case is pending.—AFP

DAMAGED caravans and vehicles remain stuck amid rubble after the landslide.—Reuters

Storms, heavy rain kill 14 across Afghanistan

Salang Pass, other major highways closed after snowfall

KABUL: Severe storms and a rain-triggered landslide have killed at least 14 people across Afghanistan, officials said, with residents facing further risks on Thursday as heavy snow hit the country.

Strong wind and heavy rain in Kandahar killed six children on Wednesday, damaging homes and causing significant financial losses in several districts, the emergency department in the southern province said.

An avalanche also killed one person in Parwan province, west of the capital Kabul.

In total, "owing to the snow and rain, 11 people" were killed across six provinces in the country's north, centre and south, including the Kandahar and Parwan incidents, a spokesperson for the National Disaster Management Authority said.

In a separate incident in eastern Nuristan province, a landslide triggered by heavy rain struck a house in Quraish village on Wednesday, killing three members of the same family and injuring two others.

"Two 10-year-old girls and a teenage boy were killed," Nuristan provincial government spokesman Fraidoon Samim said.

In central Ghazni province, a correspondent said that around 80 centimetres (31 inches) of snow fell over the past 24 hours, forcing the closure of markets and blocking roads.

Heavy snow in many provinces and Kabul has also caused traffic accidents.

Afghanistan frequently experiences deadly floods, landslides and storms, particularly in remote areas with fragile infrastructure, leaving communities vulnerable to extreme weather.

Salang Pass closed

Heavy snowfall and storms have forced the closure of several highways and transport routes across Afghanistan, including the Salang Pass, *Afghanistan International* reported quoting officials.

Snow depth in North Salang has exceeded four metres, while in South Salang it has reached nearly three metres.

An official said ongoing storms and snowfall have hampered snow-clearing operations in the area.

Several regional roads have also been closed. Routes linking Bamiyan province to the districts of Yakaolang and Panjab are shut, as are roads connecting Parwan and Ghor provinces. In Daikundi province, the Khadir, Qonaq, Kumi and Shahristan–Miramor routes have been closed. Roads in several districts of Ghazni province, including Nawur, Ajristan, Malistan and Jaghori, are also impassable.

Taliban officials said routes connecting Khost and Paktia provinces have likewise been closed due to severe weather.

Images published from Maidan Wardak province show heavy snowfall, while snow continues to fall in Herat province.

The Ministry of Public Works has urged travellers and drivers to check road conditions before setting out and to carry essential supplies, including warm clothing, food, fuel and tyre chains, when travelling on snow-covered routes.—Agencies

Two killed, many missing after NZ landslides

MOUNT MAUNGANUI: Landslides ploughed into a home and a campsite in rain-swept northern New Zealand on Thursday, killing at least two people and leaving others missing under tonnes of mud.

Rescuers used heavy machinery to dig through the mass of earth that moved after heavy overnight rain in New Zealand's North Island. Emergency workers retrieved two bodies from the remains of a buried home in the harbourside city of Tauranga, police said.

"Police are working to support their loved ones at this incredibly difficult time," a spokesperson said. Multiple people were missing after a chunk of earth from Mount Maunganui, an extinct volcano, slid into a popular campsite nearby.

The region is a big tourist draw in summer, with hikers heading up the mountain and thousands lured by white sand beaches. The mud smashed into a shower block, threw around camper vans, and spread into an adjoining heated pool complex.

Voices were briefly heard calling for help from beneath the rubble, witnesses and emergency officials said. "Whilst the land's still moving there, they're in a rescue mission," Assistant Police Commissioner Tim Anderson told reporters at the scene.

"I can't be drawn on numbers. What I can say is that it is single figures," Anderson said. A young girl is among the missing, officials said.

A dozen family members watched the search for victims from across the road. Visiting Canadian tourist Dion Siluch, 34, said he was having a massage at the now-evacuated Mount Hot Pools complex when the landslide hit. "The whole room started shaking," he said.

"When I walked out, there was a caravan in the pool, and there's a mudslide that missed me by about 30 feet," Siluch said. "It was all very confusing. I wasn't sure if someone had driven off the road and into the pool. It took me a while to realise that the mountain had collapsed and had pushed everything into the pool."—AFP

Japan suspends restart of world's biggest N-plant

TOKYO: The restart of the world's largest nuclear power plant was suspended in Japan on Thursday, with the operator saying it does not know when the problem would be solved.

The Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata province had been closed since the 2011 Fukushima disaster, but operations to relaunch it had begun on Wednesday after it received the final green light from the nuclear regulator.

However, its operator the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) said that "an alarm from the monitoring system... sounded during the reactor startup procedures", causing it to suspend operations. "We don't expect this to be solved within a day or two. There is no telling at the moment how long it will take," site superintendent Takeyuki Inagaki told a news conference. "We will for now fully focus on trying to identify the cause of what happened," he said.

The alarm that went off prompted TEPCO to "investigate the malfunctioning electrical equipment," spokesman Takashi Kobayashi said.—AFP

Plastics everywhere, and the myth that made it possible

WASHINGTON: If there's one material that defines modern life more than any other, it's plastic: present from the moment we're born in newborn stool, in product packaging, in the soil beneath our feet and the air we breathe.

Hard as it is to imagine, it wasn't always thus — and doesn't have to remain this way, argues Judith Enck in her new book, "The Problem with Plastics." "Half of all plastic ever produced was since 2007," the year the iPhone debuted, she said in an interview.

"We have a fighting chance to reduce plastics because it's very much a contemporary issue." Enck, a former senior environment official under Barack Obama, is clear-eyed about the challenges posed by the "rabidly anti-environmental" President Donald Trump.

Last year, the administration helped derail a global plastics treaty and reversed a phase-out of single-use plastics in national parks. Nevertheless, she sees momentum building at the state and local level — hailing, for example, New Jersey's "Skip the Stuff" law enacted this week, which requires restaurants to provide single-use cutlery only upon request, a measure shown to significantly reduce waste.

'Myth' of plastic recycling

Enck's book traces the history of plastic: from its earliest incarnation in 1909, when Belgian chemist Leo Baekeland invented Bakelite, through the "myth" of plastic recycling promoted by industry from the mid-20th century onward. Along the way, Enck argues that responsibility for the crisis has been systematically shifted onto consumers, even as plastic production continues to soar.

"In the United States, only five to six percent of plastics actually get recycled," she notes. Unlike metal, paper or glass, consumer plastics are made up of thousands of different types, or polymers, making large-scale recycling economically unviable.

Early advertising campaigns helped popularise terms like "litterbug," while today the focus has shifted to "chemical recycling," promoted by industry as a way to break plastics down into their basic building blocks.

Dig deeper, though, and this too is a "false solution," Enck said: a report by the Beyond Plastics nonprofit she leads found just 11 such facilities handling about one percent of US plastic waste — three of which have since shut down.

Around 33 billion pounds of plastic enter the ocean every year, "the equivalent of two large garbage trucks filled with plastic being dumped into the ocean every minute." Microplastics, along with ultra-tiny nanoplastics, can kill or severely sicken marine life before entering the food web and ultimately ending up on our plates.

Research into the health effects is ongoing, and some findings are contested. But a 2024 study found that people with microplastics in their heart arteries face an increased risk of heart attack, stroke and premature death.

For those living in the shadow of the expanding petrochemical industry, the impacts of toxic emissions have long been felt. Nowhere is this more evident than Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," where cancer rates are seven times the national average.

"Our zip code is dictating our health, and plastics therefore are a major environmental justice issue, because these are communities of colour and low-income communities," Enck said.

No to shaming

The recent surge in plastic production, she argues, is driven by a "glut" of gas generated since the mid-2000s by the hydraulic fracturing industry, which has sought new markets for its product even as it fuels climate change. It may be easy to lose hope, but Enck says it is not too late to make a difference — pointing to a twofold approach that combines personal action with collective pressure. Her book is replete with advice on how to organise, lobby local governments and advance model legislation.—AFP

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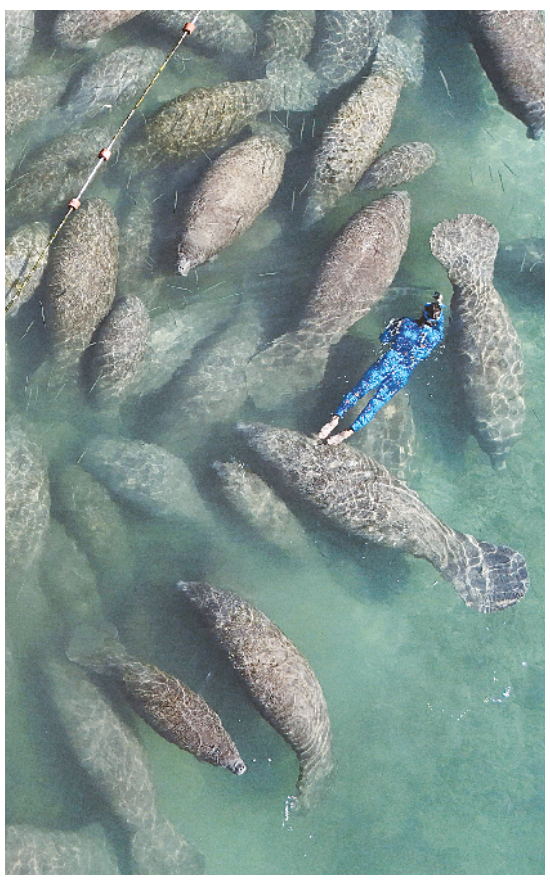

CRYSTAL SPRINGS (Florida, US): This aerial view shows tourists mingling in the water with manatees at a natural spring. Large numbers of manatees congregate in the Crystal River refuge to shelter from cold spells and rest in the warmer water provided by the springs.—AFP

KHARKIV: A military truck moves along a road covered with an anti-drone net in Ukraine.—Reuters

A FEB 2, 2025, file photo shows Taylor Swift acknowledging applause during the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles in this Feb 2, 2025, file picture.—Reuters/ file

Singer Taylor Swift named to Songwriters Hall of Fame

LOS ANGELES: Taylor Swift, 36, will become the second-youngest songwriter ever inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame, joining the ranks of Stevie Wonder, who was 33 when he was inducted in 1983, the organisation announced on Wednesday.

The honour places the pop superstar, winner of 14 Grammys, among the most celebrated songwriters across generations.

Swift will be inducted alongside Alanis Morissette, Kenny Loggins and Kiss bandmates Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons, with the ceremony set for June 11 at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York City, the organisation announced on CBS Mornings.

"They've literally written the soundtrack to our lives. The songs we dance to, cry to and rock out to," culture correspondent Anthony Mason said on CBS Mornings before announcing the inductees.

Established in 1969, the Songwriters Hall of Fame requires that inducted songwriters have a notable catalogue of songs to qualify for induction 20 years after the first commercial release of a song.

The "Bad Blood" singer has won four Grammy album of the year awards. Her latest release, "The Life of a Showgirl," sold more copies than any other album in the modern era during its first week of release, according to Billboard, which cited data from Luminate, a firm that tracks music sales.

In May 2025, Swift announced that she bought her music rights, officially reclaiming ownership of all her master recordings, including her first six albums.—Reuters

HERAT: A diorama depicts the Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion of 1979 at the Manzar-i-Jahad Museum. In keeping with the Taliban's ban on depiction of living things, the faces of both women and men are covered in plaster.—AFP

WASHINGTON: Police detain Joan Andrews Bell, an anti-abortion campaigner, during a demonstration calling upon the Trump administration to ban the abortion pill.—Reuters